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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses school structure and curriculum for secondary schools in Ireland. The document surveys the research that has been conducted. Secondary schools in Ireland are for students between the ages of 12 and 18, with compulsory education for students up to 16 years of age. The three main types of schools are traditional academic secondary schools, vocational schools, and comprehensive community schools. Today all types of school are encouraged to offer comprehensive curricula, although many continue to exhibit their traditional orientations. Curricula are organized on the basis of subjects or disciplines. Schools can choose from about 30 subjects. The most popular courses are English, Irish, mathematics, French, science, history, and geography. For the compulsory levels Ireland is above average for percentage of time allocated to language, about average in time for scientific subjects, technologies, social sciences, and ethics, and below average in allocation of time to artistic subjects and physical education. The survey of curriculum research is divided into three sections. The first, general curriculum, concluded that there is relatively little research on the question of types of curricula that seem most appropriate for secondary students. One survey showed that young people saw basic education as important for working life, but also saw a role for technical vocational subjects. The second section, specific curricula, indicated that research in individual areas has been devoted to mathematics in the context of international studies. The third section reported research findings that education is related to later employment. (DK)

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RESEARCH INTO SECONDARY SCHOOL CURRICULA IN IRELAND

Report submitted

by

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Secondary schools in Ireland cater for students between the ages of 12 and 18 years. While education is not compulsory for students over 15 years of age, 90% of 16-year-olds and 74% of 17-year-olds attend school (Ireland: Department of Education, 1991). Students are distributed among three main types of school: traditional academic secondary schools (62.4%), vocational schools (24.9%), and comprehensive/community schools (11.7%). (A further 1% attend other types of school). Up to the 1960s, curricula in academic secondary schools were more academic than curricula in vocational schools. With the introduction of comprehensive schools in the 1960s, the distinction between schools in what curricula they could offer was abolished. Today all types of school are encouraged to offer comprehensive curricula. In practice, however, many schools continue to exhibit their traditional orientations.

The comprehensivization of curricula in the 1960s served to increase the emphasis on technical and 'vocational' subjects in school curricula. It was felt that this would have economic benefits (preparing a skilled work force) as well as personal ones (catering for a wide range of student abilities and interests.)

Curricula are organized on the basis of subjects or disciplines. Schools can choose from about 30 subjects. The majority of students study eight or nine subjects during their first three years in a second-level school and seven or eight during their final two or three years. The most popular subjects are English, Irish, Mathematics, French, Science, History, and Geography. It has been estimated that during the period of compulsory full-time education (which includes primary schooling as well as lower secondary grades) Ireland is above the average for countries in the European Community in the percentage of time which is allocated to language, about average in the time that is allocated to scientific subjects, social sciences, technologies, and

ethics and religious instruction, and below average in allocation of time to artistic subjects and physical education (EURYDICE, 1987).

General Curriculum

There is relatively little research which has addressed the question of type or types of curricula that seem most appropriate for students in second-level schools at a time when participation rates are increasing dramatically in such schools and the conditions of work outside school are subject to rapid change (Mulcahy, 1981, 1989). In practice, in response to government policy, there has been an increase over the past two decades in the proportion of students who are enrolled in technical vocational courses (Lewis & Kellaghan, 1987) and it seems to be generally assumed that more students should be encouraged to follow the technical vocational route in future (Ireland, 1992; Roche & Tansey, 1992). If the form of education which is presented as technical vocational in schools in the future is similar to the form that is presented at the moment, then it will be a type of education that is designed not to provide students with specific vocational skills but with general competencies and values which can later be applied and developed in a wide range of occupations and other adult situations (Kellaghan & Lewis, 1991).

An approach in which a broad-based vocational education is offered in schools is not inconsistent with industrialists' perceptions of the characteristics which school leavers should possess. In a survey of 150 member companies carried out by the Confederation of Irish Industry (1990), in which respondents rated the importance of school leavers' skills for employment, 70% rated oral communication skills as 'very important'; a similar rating was given by 58% to written communication, by 48% to numeracy, by 46% to enterprise/initiative, and by 39% to problem-solving.

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In another survey, young people who had left school five years previously also almost universally regarded basic education (in literacy and numeracy) as important for working life. However, they also saw a role for technical vocational subjects. This was particularly true for less qualified individuals (Hannan & Shortall, 1991).

Specific Curricula

Research in individual subject areas has been carried out on mathematics in the context of international studies. In these studies, curricula have been analyzed to highlight cross-national similarities and differences (Travers & Westbury, 1989). The analysis revealed that the educational system in Ireland (together with a few other countries) had been heavily influenced by the 'new mathematics' of the 1960s based on the Bourbaki tradition, which placed a heavy emphasis on algebra and modern symbolism. Comparison with curricula in other countries indicated that Irish acceptance of the 'new mathematics' had been more enthusiastic than elsewhere with the result that the mathematics curriculum in Irish schools was out of line with the curricula of most other countries. Further, it appeared that the mathematics curriculum in Irish schools attempted to cover too much at too early a stage. These defects have been addressed in recent reforms.

Education and Later Employment

As in other countries, educational level (the highest school grade completed) has been found to relate to later occupational status in Ireland. The longer one stays in full-time education, the higher the status of the occupation one is likely to enter (Greaney & Kellaghan, 1984). Not surprisingly, former students' satisfaction with their education is also related to the students' level of educational attainment (Hannan & Shortall, 1991).

Not only is the number of years completed in school important for one's future occupational status but employers seem to take into account performance on public examinations (taken at about 15 and 17 years of age) in making employment decisions. Students who do not take any public examinations are much more likely to be unemployed than students who are more successful in the educational system (Ireland: Department of Labour, 1991). So also are students who perform poorly on such examinations (Hannan, 1992). Specialization in technical vocational subjects only increases slightly the probability of employment in one's own locality (Hannan, 1992).

Young people are not unaware of these relationships. A study of individuals who had left school five years earlier revealed that they thought that their level of educational certification was an important factor in getting a job. Those without a job attributed a greater importance to qualifications in gaining employment than did those with a job (Hannan & Shortall, 1991).

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